

## UNIVERSITY FUNDING

# Academic Earmarks: The Money Schools Love to Hate

An unusual query from a “pork-busting” U.S. senator has revealed an uneasy ambivalence among university presidents toward academic earmarks. Their answers suggest that, like it or not, such directed spending on research is now part of the fabric of higher education.

On 27 July, Senator Tom Coburn (R-OK) asked 110 U.S. universities to describe any federal research dollars obtained in the past 6 years through the good graces of their congressional delegations rather than via a competitive review. He also wanted to know which universities have hired lobbyists to help obtain earmarks and the impact of the found money on their campuses and on science.

Coburn, who chairs a Senate financial management subcommittee, calls research earmarks, which have grown into a multi-billion-dollar-a-year phenomenon (see graphic), “a gateway drug to overspending.” His six-question letter set off a month-long frenzy of meetings and conference calls among vice presidents for sponsored research, directors of federal relations, professional associations, and lobbyists to figure out how, and whether, to respond. Only 14 schools met Coburn’s 1 September deadline, although a few told him they needed more time.

Respondents, which included major research universities and leading recipients of federal earmarks, offered varying views of earmarking. But even those who said they abhor the practice acknowledged occasional dalliances. Cornell University President David Skorton, for example, cited “a long-standing and well-documented policy of not pursuing or accepting earmarks from federal agencies that award funds on a competitive basis” before acknowledging, two paragraphs later, that “Cornell makes two exceptions to this policy.” The biggest is earmarked funds from the Department of Agriculture’s cooperative research and extension service, which provides about 1.5% of the university’s \$381 million federal research budget. “They’ve worked on the basis of earmarks since 1865,” explains Robert Richardson, Cornell’s vice provost for research, about a program he says is essential to fulfilling Cornell’s role as a land-grant college.

The University of Michigan shares Cornell’s distaste for pork, says Stephen Forrest, vice president for research, although his reply to Coburn notes that Michigan last year received three earmarks totaling \$5.3 million. In fact, the university has adopted a formal application process—much like a grant proposal in its length and complexity—for faculty members who think their idea deserves to be one of the school’s “rare exceptions” ([www.research.umich.edu/policies/earmarkpolicy.html](http://www.research.umich.edu/policies/earmarkpolicy.html)).

Some universities see earmarks as a way to simultaneously move up the academic food chain and strengthen the local economy. “The direct appropriations that the Kentucky delegation works hard to acquire for the university are an important part of UK’s federal funded projects,” writes Lee Todd Jr., president of the University of Kentucky, who

Not every institution is as comfortable as Kentucky is in speaking openly of its appetite for earmarks. University of Missouri President Elson Floyd, for example, provided the same answer to two of Coburn’s questions, saying curtly that “all specific objectives and goals [for the research funded by the earmark] are outlined by the granting Federal agency... and specific measures of success are determined by [those] specific goals and objectives.” And Floyd gave one-word answers—no, yes, and yes—when asked whether Missouri has a policy on earmarks, hires lobbyists to snare them, and thinks they are beneficial to the school. (In an increasingly common practice among universities, Missouri retains a Washington lobbyist, Julie Dammann, former chief of staff to Missouri’s senior senator, Republican Kit Bond, well-known for his earmarking prowess.)

John Hart, Coburn’s communications director, says his boss blames his legislative colleagues more than the academic community for what is happening. “The earmark process doesn’t help universities so much as it helps lobbyists and Congress,” says Hart, who notes that Coburn has held dozens of hearings on all manner of federal spending practices. “Because every time they get an earmark, the politicians can hold a press conference to claim credit.”

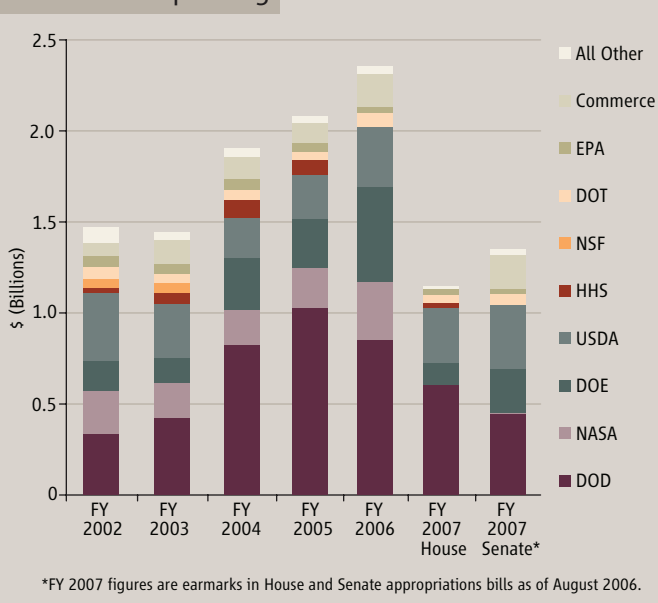
Not surprisingly, Coburn’s aggressive campaign has angered influential senators who are also heavyweight porkers. Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK), chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee and author of the notorious \$225 million “bridge to nowhere” earmark for his state, has so far blocked Coburn’s bid to

create a publicly accessible database of Senate earmarks. And many legislators are said to be incensed that Coburn went over their heads in asking universities how they obtained specific earmarks.

Those tensions are a big reason that universities found Coburn’s letter so troublesome. “The last thing you want to do,” explains one university lobbyist, “is to get caught in the middle of a fight between two powerful senators.”

—JEFFREY MERVIS

Earmarks Keep Rising



**Research a la carte.** Congress has become increasingly fond of larding agency budgets with university research projects based in their districts.

notes that his school has received “over 100 [since 2000] worth a total of \$120 million.” Wendy Baldwin, U.K. vice president for research and the former head of extramural research at the National Institutes of Health, explains that earmarks “can help us to get into the top 20” recipients of federally funded research by public universities. The university closely monitors how the money is spent, she says, adding that “we expect people to advance based on this boost.”